PC MAGAZINE

Microsoft Windows Server

Combo Boxes in Excel

August 19, 2003
By Neil J. Rubenking

I want to insert information from a combo box into an Excel spreadsheet. I can create the combo box easily enough, but I don't know how to make it active with a list of options that can be inserted into a cell. Can you help?

Craig Williamson

Somewhere in your spreadsheet, enter the values that should appear in the combo box's drop-down list. (They can be placed on a separate sheet if you like.) Click the Combo Box button on the Control Toolbox toolbar; if you don't see this toolbar, right-click the main toolbar and check Control Toolbox in the list. Click to place the combo box in the desired location, then right-click it and choose Properties. (If right-clicking the combo box does not bring up a menu, click the Design Mode button at the top of the Control Toolbox and try again.)

In the list of properties, select ListFillRange and enter the range of cells holding the values—for example, Sheet2!A1:A5. Select LinkedCell and enter the cell that should receive the value selected in the combo box. Select the Style property and choose 2 - fmStyleDropDownList. (This ensures that the user can choose only items from the list.) Close the Properties window and click the Exit Design Mode button in the Control Toolbox. When a user makes a selection from the combo box, it appears in the linked cell. But a user can still enter data directly in the linked cell.

There's another way to get the combo-box effect: one that shows the drop-down list right in the cell. Select the cell and choose Validation from the Data menu. On the Settings tab of the resulting dialog, select List from the options under Allow. In the Source field, enter the allowable values separated by commas. As an option, you can enter = followed by the name of a range containing the allowable values.

Uncheck Ignore blank, and check In-cell dropdown. If you wish, click the Input Message tab and enter text for a ToolTip that appears when a user selects the cell. On the Error Alert tab, select the Stop style if you want to forbid users to enter data other than the allowable values, and enter the text you want to be displayed in the error message box. The Warning and Information styles permit users to enter other values. Figure 1 shows both the ToolTip and the error message.

The combo-box control offers one significant advantage over the in-cell drop-down: When users begin typing, it automatically jumps to the first item that matches. In a long list, this can be quite a benefit. Yet, as noted, users can bypass the combo box and enter data (possibly erroneous) directly into the linked cell. By combining the two techniques, you can get the handy auto-completion feature without risking bad data.

Configure the combo box as described above, and set up data validation for the linked cell. In the Data Validation dialog, do not check the In-cell drop-down box. On the Input Message tab of that dialog, enter a message like Please use the combo box below for data entry. Select the Stop style on the Error Alert tab and you're done.